

At Press Conference, Norton Thanks Voters for her Biggest Vote in 16 Years- September 13, 2006

At Press Conference, Norton Thanks Voters for her Biggest Vote in 16 Years and Explains Strategy and Witnesses Chosen for D.C. House Vote Bill Judiciary Hearing Thursday

September 13, 2006

Washington, DC—Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) thanked D.C. voters for her 94 percent win over her challenger yesterday, the highest primary vote she has ever received, at a news conference this morning with Mayor Anthony Williams on the upcoming Judiciary Committee hearing on the new D.C. House voting rights bill, H.R. 5388, the District of Columbia Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act. The Congresswoman expressed gratitude to Council Chair Linda Cropp and the Mayor for the “splendid job they have done for D.C.” and for working so well with her in the Congress. Norton also expressed appreciation to Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner (R-WI) for permitting an even number of Majority and Minority witnesses instead of the usual three-to-one ratio, in favor of the Majority. One essential Minority witness is a constitutional expert, respected by both sides, Adam H. Charnes, a former Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Office of Legal Policy for the Bush Administration. Mayor Williams and Democratic members of Congress agreed that the Governor of Utah should be the other Minority witness because, Norton said, “the untold story of the bill” is its strong Utah support, which is understandably overshadowed by D.C.’s long struggle, but hearing the case for Utah is “essential to any serious strategy for passage in the Republican Congress.” The Majority witnesses are John Fortier, a research fellow with the American Enterprise Institute, and Jonathan Turley of George Washington University Law School.

The Congresswoman said, “I work so hard and feel so passionately about the denials and insults to my hometown that it may be a cliché to say that yesterday’s strong vote to return me to Congress will make me work harder. Beginning with tomorrow’s hearing, however, I will take yesterday’s vote as a strong wind at my back, pushing me to do more and to do it better and smarter to become worthy of the continuing confidence of voters.”

The full text of Norton’s statement follows.

Tomorrow we are pleased to move forward with an essential and historic hearing in the Judiciary Committee, the committee of primary jurisdiction that must consider all voting rights bills, including the new House vote bill (H.R. 5388, the District of Columbia Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act). Government Reform Committee Chair Tom Davis and I have spent the last four years in painstaking work and negotiations to answer all the objections that were raised about the original bill, and particularly to achieve a bill that was capable of getting sufficient votes from both parties to pass. (Hearing: Thursday, September 14, 2006 at 2 PM before the Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on the Constitution in Room 2141, Rayburn House Office Building).

That work has already paid off handsomely in the Government Reform Committee vote reporting out the bill with 15 Democrats and 14 Republicans voting “yes” for a decisive 29-4 victory. However, one of the most important and difficult goals Tom and I had to achieve was securing agreement for consideration and a vote in the Judiciary Committee. Although I believed we had a good chance in the Government Reform Committee on which Tom and I serve, I knew we could not proceed there alone without candidly informing residents that the vote in Government Reform could not send the bill to the floor. More seriously, proceeding with a vote in Government Reform without trying to get Judiciary Committee consideration risked offending its powerful Chair, Representative James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin, and permanently hurting the bill’s chances. It was worth the work and the wait to achieve Mr. Sensenbrenner’s agreement to do a mark-up of the bill, which he has promised in a letter to Chairman Tom Davis. The hearing that precedes the mark-up we will work to achieve will occur tomorrow.

Each committee has its own rules on how it will conduct hearings, including how witnesses will be chosen by the Majority and the Minority, and neither Tom nor I is a member of the Judiciary Committee. I am therefore particularly grateful to Chairman Jim Sensenbrenner, the architect of the recently enacted reauthorization of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, for his generosity and flexibility in allowing two witnesses to testify for the Minority side instead of the usual one witness, or a

ratio of three-to-one. Instead he has agreed to an equal number of two witnesses for each side. He also has graciously agreed that Chairman Davis and I can participate in the hearing proceedings, an unusual courtesy for this committee. I want to give special thanks to Ranking Member John Conyers (D-MI), a strong advocate of our bill who has worked throughout this process on our behalf. Chairman Davis and his staff have continued to be invaluable here and throughout our work to get to tomorrow. Even now discussions are in progress on moving the bill further in the Judiciary Committee and to the floor, and discussions have been underway for several months in the Senate. Nothing is ever guaranteed the District of Columbia in the Congress, but if we stopped believing that everything is possible and working to make it so, we would not have come this far. As always, our mission is uphill, but our goal remains passage before adjournment.

As might be imagined, my choices for witnesses initially were the heads of state for the two jurisdictions that would benefit equally from the bill, Mayor Anthony Williams and Governor Jon Huntsman Jr. However, because the Judiciary Committee, of course, must particularly consider the legal and constitutional issues raised by voting rights bills, a recognized constitutional expert for our side was essential. We are fortunate that Adam H. Charnes, a distinguished constitutional lawyer who was Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General responsible for legal policy issues for the Bush Administration, has agreed to testify. Mr. Charnes is the co-author of a legal opinion supporting our bill that has been respected as much by Republicans as Democrats. Of course, this left only one remaining witness that could be called by our side, and a decision had to be made whether that witness should be the Mayor or the Governor. Mayor Williams, Mr. Davis, Mr. Conyers and I jointly agreed that in light of the controlling Republican Majority in the House, that witness should be the Governor of Utah and we are grateful to Chairman Sensenbrenner, who had final sign-off, agreed to this witness.

Members of the Congress have had ample opportunity to hear the views of the Mayor and me on D.C. voting rights. However, if there is any weakness in the bill, it is that D.C.'s long, vocal struggle for voting rights has overshadowed the bill's exactly equivalent benefit to the voters of Utah. Most members of Congress know what the bill will do for the District. The great untold story of H.R. 5388 is how strongly the bill is supported in Utah and how the entire Utah House delegation has pressed for the bill, even meeting with local and national organizations who have long fought for D.C. voting rights on strategy for achieving passage. Governor Huntsman's testimony is essential to spelling out the Utah case for the bill if we are serious about passage.

Utah continues to harbor deep disappointment about not winning an additional vote in 2000. By a small margin, that state was denied an additional seat. Utah was so distressed that it unsuccessfully appealed the matter all the way to the Supreme Court when its missionaries abroad were not counted. Now the state has an opportunity to recoup that seat and it wants it as badly as we in the District want ours. This Congress has had too few win-win bills where equivalence for both sides is clear and not undeniable. Politics and justice have come together in H.R. 5388. We must press the bill in the remaining month for what is an offer both sides cannot afford to refuse.